

OPEN LETTER IN HONOR OF OUR
NATION'S VETERANS**HON. ELIJAH E. CUMMINGS**

OF MARYLAND

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, November 10, 1999

Mr. CUMMINGS. Mr. Speaker, on Veterans Day, America honors those men and women who have served to keep this nation free and bring the world peace. Not only have these generations of veterans waged war and destroyed totalitarian threats, but they have engaged in the peacekeeping missions that strengthen democracy worldwide.

As I pay tribute to these worthy citizens tomorrow, Veterans Day, I am deeply troubled by the irresponsible across-the-board 1 percent cut in discretionary spending recently proposed by the House Republican leadership. A 1 percent cut from the total FY2000 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) appropriation would reduce available funding for veterans programs, including veterans health care services. The adverse impact this reduction would have on the health and lives of our nation's veterans is significant.

For the past three years, the VA has endured straight-line funding which was left the agency struggling to meet the increasing costs of medical care for the growing number of enrolled veterans it treats. As such, veterans and veterans service organizations called on Congress to appropriate up to \$3 billion more in health care funding than the Administration's original budget and have denounced these Republican cuts. I, along with my Democratic Colleagues, have strongly supported proposals throughout the year that would have actually added from \$2 to \$3 billion to the President's initial proposal for veterans' medical care. On October 20, the President signed into law a \$1.7 billion increase.

Now, the Republican leadership claims that their 1 percent reduction in funding would have no effect on health care to veterans because the VA could save millions by eliminating overhead in capital assets and other "government waste." What the Republican leadership fails to acknowledge are the tremendous changes the VA has already made, such as closing thousands of beds, eliminating thousands of staff positions, and strengthening auditing systems. Moreover, whether savings of this magnitude could be realized in the immediate future without significantly uprooting current VA programs is highly questionable. Even without cuts, currently approved funding is less than required to fulfill our nation's duty to adequately care for veterans.

I believe that providing a \$1.7 billion increase for veterans health care and then turning around a few weeks later and taking dollars away is Republican budget gimmickry. The bottom line is clear. Our nation's veterans have sacrificed life and limb in protection of our constitutional rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I submit to my Republican colleagues in Congress that, in turn, our veterans deserve our commitment to fund veterans programs and services to ensure that they are themselves able to enjoy these same rights.

THE ATLANTIC HIGHLY MIGRA-
TORY SPECIES CONSERVATION
ACT**HON. JIM SAXTON**

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, November 10, 1999

Mr. SAXTON. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Conservation Act. I believe this bill represents a good first step to "Right-Size" the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico pelagic longline fleet. Senator BREAUX is expected to also introduce a similar measure in the Senate today or later this week.

Specifically, my bill would: (1) Establish three time-area closures for highly migratory species—one permanent area in the south Atlantic and two time-area closures in the Gulf of Mexico; (2) establish and authorize funding for two buyout programs for approximately 75 eligible vessels; (3) Establish a highly migratory species bycatch reduction research program within the Southeast Fisheries Service Center of the National Marine Fisheries Service to identify and test fishing gear configurations and uses to determine the most effective way to reduce billfish bycatch mortality in pelagic fisheries; and (4) attempt to address fishery related concerns in the area known as the mid Atlantic bight.

The proposed closures represent historic "Hot spots" for bycatch of undersized swordfish and billfish by catch based on available science from the National Marine Fisheries Service. These closed areas would help to rebuild and protect swordfish populations as well as other highly migratory species and prohibit pelagic longline fishing during these closed periods.

The bill includes a compensation package that authorizes specific congressionally appropriated funds that will be combined with a direct loan to be repaid by both commercial and recreational fishermen.

Mr. Speaker, this has been a long and difficult road to get this bill ready for introduction.

What started as an introductory meeting just before the August recess with representatives of the pelagic longline industry and several recreational fishing organizations gradually turned into hundreds of telephone calls the next several months. Many conversations with recreational and commercial fisherman and their organizational representatives from all over the country took place which lead to concepts—then proposed legislative language—and finally a bill for introduction today.

I would like to thank members of the Blue Water Fishermen's Association located in my district for their leadership on this initiative, the Billfish Foundation, the Coastal Conservation Association, the American Sportsfishing Association and many other recreational fishermen in my district, in the State of New Jersey and throughout the country who have worked with me to develop this bill.

While not all of these groups are entirely happy with this bill, we hope we can continue to dialog and continue to work together. I would also like to thank the National Marine Fisheries Service for starting this process by establishing a limited entry program for the pelagic longline fishery in the highly migratory species fishery management plan.

Mr. Speaker, I realize that this bill is not perfect. I realize that there is much that remains

unresolved, particularly in the waters of the mid Atlantic. I look forward to productive and spirited hearings over the coming months that will take place before the subcommittee in Washington, New Jersey, and perhaps Florida as well.

I believe it is very important that all interested fishermen and their supportive organizations realize this is the beginning of a process, and that much lies ahead.

In the end, I am confident that the final bill will include conservation measures designed to protect these important and impressive migratory marine species, will compensate the fishermen who decide to leave the fishery, will help to maintain a viable U.S. pelagic longline fishery for the future, and will send a strong message to our fellow fishing nations that greater conservation measures need to be enacted to protect and rebuild swordfish populations and reduce unnecessary billfish bycatch.

H.R. , ATLANTIC HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES
CONSERVATION ACT OF 1999

CONSERVATION BENEFITS

(1) Highly Migratory Species Conservation Zones: The Act creates one permanent closure and two time-area closures:

Pelagic Longline fishing prohibited within zones during closed time period/season.

The three zones represent "hot spots" for bycatch of undersized swordfish & billfish based on available science from the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Atlantic swordfish conservation zone

Extends from the North Carolina/South Carolina border south through to Key West, Florida, to reduce high mortality rates of juvenile swordfish and high rates of billfish bycatch.

Covers 80,000 square nautical miles.

Closed indefinitely year-around to pelagic longline vessels but not recreation or charter vessels.

Gulf of Mexico swordfish conservation zone

Extends from North Eastern Gulf of Mexico/DeSoto Canyon region (Mobile, AL to Panama City, FL), to help build swordfish stocks.

Covers 5,400 square nautical miles.

Time-area closure from January 1 through Memorial Day each year indefinitely to pelagic longline vessels but not recreation or charter vessels.

Gulf of Mexico billfish conservation zone

Extends from the Gulf of Mexico from the U.S./Mexico border to Cape San Blas, Florida, out to the 500 fathom line, to reduce billfish bycatch.

Covers 82,000 square nautical miles.

Time-area closure from Memorial Day to Labor Day each year for four years from date of enactment to pelagic longline vessels but not to recreation or charter vessels.

(2) Establishes the Highly Migratory Species Bycatch Reduction Research Program: The Act establishes within the Southeast Fisheries Service Center (SFSC), NMFS, a three year Pelagic Longline Billfish Bycatch and Mortality Reduction Research Program to identify and test a variety of pelagic longline fishing gear configurations and uses to determine which configurations and uses are the most effective in reducing billfish bycatch mortality in pelagic longline fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the exclusive economic zone, specifically the Mid Atlantic Bight. In addition, an observer program for the Mid Atlantic Bight will be established and required for vessels operating during the period of June through September to monitor any net increase impacting billfish bycatch and bycatch mortality as well